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Experts on Islam Pointing Fingers At One Another

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN

If many of the country's specialists on Islam and the Middle East are getting more public exposure than usual, the debate over who's right has also been heating up. One well-known expert in particular is blaming what he sees as the establishment in the field for failing for years to predict the danger of Islamic extremism.

The expert, Martin Kramer, who teaches both in the United States and in Israel and is editor of Middle East Quarterly, writes in a new book, "Ivory Towers on Sand," that the study of the Middle East and of Islam has been afflicted with so much political bias and wishful thinking that most scholars have missed "the major evolutions of Middle Eastern politics and society over the past two decades." And in Mr. Kramer's view of things, nothing has been more completely missed than the threat posed by Islamic terrorism to the United States and the West.

Not surprisingly, Mr. Kramer's accusation has provoked a heated debate in the academic world, with angry rejoinders from some of those criticized by name in his book. Those who disagree accuse Mr. Kramer of a host of sins, from being motivated by his own political agenda to quoting his rivals out of context to misunderstanding the nature of Islam himself.

"I haven't read the book yet, but what I've read about it is completely consistent with the views that Martin has expressed in recent years, and completely offensive," said Richard Bulliet, a professor of history at the Middle East Institute at Columbia University. "The impression that I have is that he thinks that any degree of sympathetic study of Islamic politics is simply dead wrong, that it's anathema and should be represented as such."

In an important sense, the charges and countercharges prompted by Mr. Kramer's book are a new chapter in a continuing saga, one that in recent years has seen deep fissures develop both over Middle East politics in general and the nature of Islamic fundamentalism in particular. The disagreements have a good deal to do with Middle East politics themselves, with Mr. Kramer and his scholarly allies tending to be more pro-Israeli and more critical of the Arabs than his scholarly adversaries.

But the debate also encompasses other questions confronting Americans as they ponder the attacks of Sept. 11 and their government's response to them. How powerful a force is militant Islam? Is it by its very nature an enemy of the United States and the West? Or has it become an enemy because the United States has misunderstood it and pushed it into opposition? Does it contain within itself the possibility of a democratic evolution?

"There are two camps," said John L. Esposito, a leading American scholar of Islam and the founder of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University, who is among

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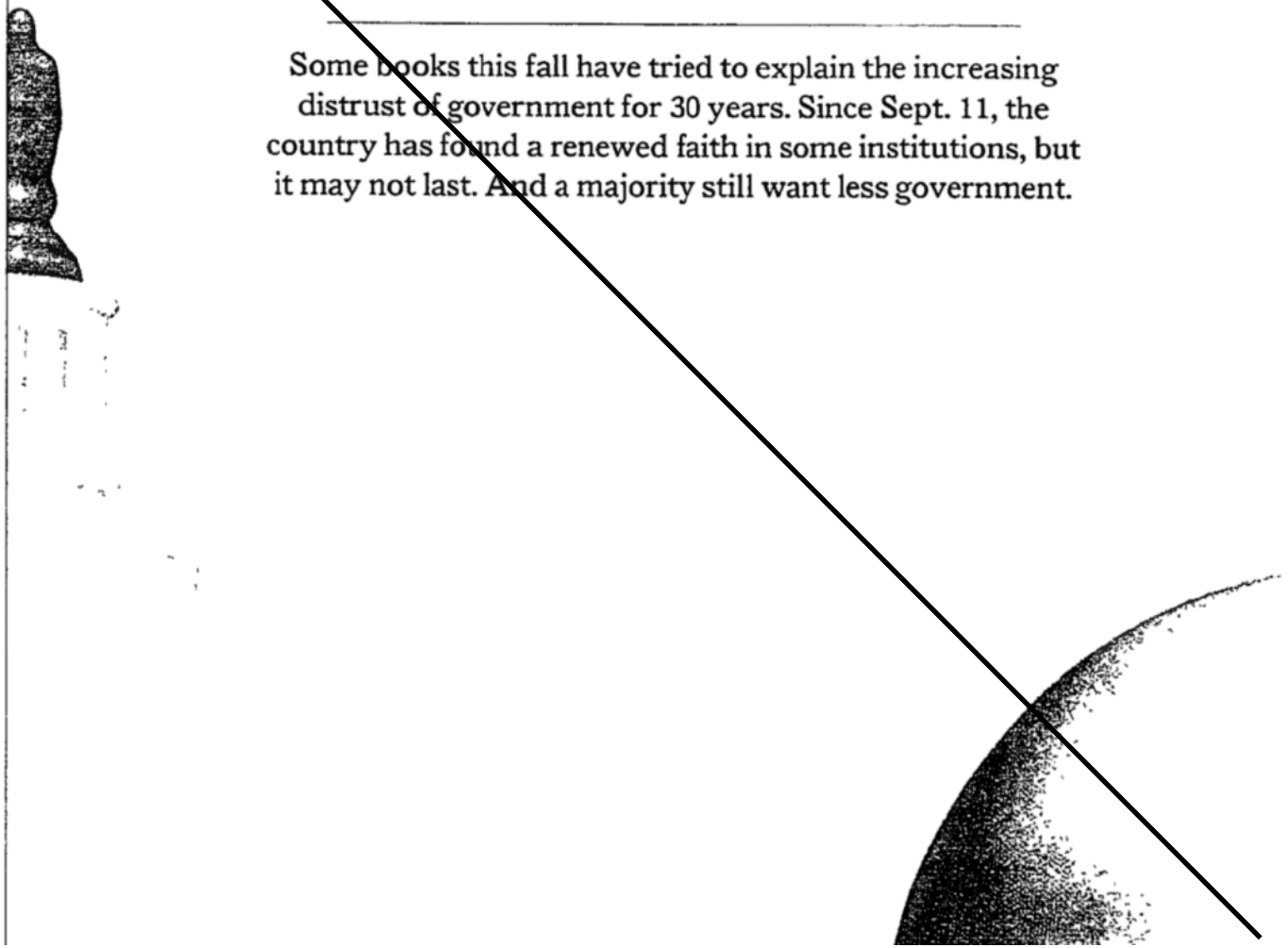
Suddenly, Americans Trust Uncle Sam

Some books this fall have tried to explain the increasing distrust of government for 30 years. Since Sept. 11, the country has found a renewed faith in some institutions, but it may not last. And a majority still want less government.



Many Experts on Islam Are Pointing Fingers at One Another

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the scholars criticized by Mr. Kramer. "One of them believes that all Islamic fundamentalist groups or movements are a threat. The other, represented by myself and several others, would say that you have to distinguish between mainstream Islamic society and extremists, who attack people in their own societies and now in the West."

Daniel Pipes, the founder of Middle East Quarterly and author of several books on the Middle East, is a colleague of Mr. Kramer and agrees that the division has to do with the vision of fundamentalism Asked how he differed from Mr. Esposito, he replied

"What I say is that this is a totalitarian movement and everybody involved in it is a problem There is no good in it He would make a distinction between good and bad fundamentalisms."

To Mr. Kramer, the majority of experts "failed to ask the right questions at the right time about Islam." He said: "They underestimated its impact in the 1980's; they misrepresented its role in the early 1990's; and they glossed over its growing potential for terrorism against America in the late 1990's"

He argues in part that what he calls the establishment in Middle East studies in this country failed, first, to predict the revolution of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in Iran in 1979 and then to learn something from it.

"In their view any Islamic movement is either moderate or potentially moderate," Mr. Kramer said of the major research centers in the United States. "So every time there is a disagreeable act by some Muslim group, what they say is 'Well, this doesn't represent Islam; this is not true Islam' But the real question, which they don't ask, is why do the people who perpetrate these acts justify them in terms of Islam?"

Mr Kramer's book was published by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, a group that has close relations with Israel, and Mr. Kramer himself is a past director of the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies in Tel Aviv These organizations are respected by scholars in the field, but these institutional affiliations suggest to some of Mr Kramer's detractors that his underlying purpose is to discredit those who disagree with him on the basic Israeli-Arab conflict

Associated Press

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolution in Iran surprised many.

"If you look at Martin's own profile, his own ideological profile, and that of his publisher — which are not primarily concerned with what is best for America — it's clear that there is an agenda here, which is to discredit the entire Middle East establishment," Mr. Esposito said

Reactions to Mr Kramer's views are mixed, reflecting what Mr Esposito called the warfare that takes place in the field. Some, including Mr. Bulliet and others, agree with Mr. Kramer that academic experts, like most government experts, were focused on other sorts of change in the Middle East and underestimated the strength of extreme fundamentalist groups.

"The field has been narrowly focused and polarized in part because the Arab-Israeli conflict took so much of its attention," said Fawaz Gerges, a professor of international affairs and Middle East studies at Sarah Lawrence College. "One of the consequences of that is that we have underestimated the reach and power of fringe Islamicist groups, like bin Laden, like the Egyptian Jihad and other groups in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon"

"Osama bin Laden was an obscure man up until the mid-1990's," Mr Gerges continued "We did not imagine how his message resonates in the minds of many Muslims"

Mr Kramer views Mr Esposito as representative of much that is wrong in Middle Eastern studies, writing about him as an influential figure among policymakers in Washington who in the 1990's "came forward to claim that Islamist movements were nothing other than movements of democratic reform" Mr Esposito's reply is that Mr Kramer errs both in his characterization of his writings and in his view of Islamic politics

"The best response is probably to ask people to read my books, like "The Islamic Threat Myth or Reality?" and come to their own conclusions," Mr. Esposito said "I specifically deal with bin Laden and talk about him as an extremist involved in acts of terrorism. But I also say that we shouldn't focus on him too much because that would obscure the fact that there are other bin Ladens, and an excessive focus makes him more of a drawing card for other extremist groups."

Mr Bulliet, who, like Mr. Esposito, is criticized by name by Mr. Kramer, agrees with him that a degree of wishful thinking has infiltrated the analyses of some experts. Still, he argues that it is Mr. Kramer's view of Islam as monolithic and unchangingly hostile that is incorrect.

"The question is what do you see when you look at Islamic politics," Mr Bulliet said "Is it an evil that must be fought against root and branch? Or is it a spectrum of political activities that encompasses strong advocates of participatory government, and Iran would now be representative of that, and advocates of totalitarian government, and bin Laden would represent that

"But if you say that everyone that wants Islam central to public life is an enemy," Mr. Bulliet said, "then you empower the radical fringe."